

What Is a Database?

Database: a means to store and share information like an electronic address book or filing cabinet and an aide in making connections.

Databases are usually a large collection of data organized especially for rapid search and retrieval. The data set of information is structured and often associated with software used to retrieve, sort and perform calculations on the data.

There are many different kinds of databases that store and manage multiple levels of information. Below are three examples associated with the work of grassroots organizations.

Contact/Client Databases range from simple mailing address lists or volunteer tracking systems to complex membership maintenance databases.

Example: An emergency action may be required to address a sudden legislative decision. A contact/client database allows you to search and sort for members who are: a) in a specific area, b) interested in actions and c) skilled to assist your staff at the event.

To Be Effective: Contact/Client databases need to provide useful print out reports. Planning with staff, leaders and members can significantly increase your database's effectiveness and usage for organizing. On-going data entry will provide the most current and accurate information about your constituents.

Some basic attributes to include for your Contact/Client Databases are: contact information; people's preferences and schedules, volunteer availability; sorting options - sort people by events, or services provided, or by school; special functions that automatically generate reminders to contact people; information about donors or members that can't be standardized; you may want to link your database to forms developed in other software, such as MSWord, in order to conduct mail merges

Donation/Donor Databases track information about potential & actual donors and all donations.

Example: As you create your fundraising plan, you may need to sort contributors to attend your next awards dinner or host a house party, as well as identify those to be upgrade to major donors.

To Be Effective: Donor Databases should be able to generate donation reports; allow you to sort your donors in a variety of ways; record multiple donation/donor details; create and sort lists of potential and current donors; print letters and labels and a variety of reports. It should also have fields for donor's issue interest, friends and other contacts, as well as, source of wealth.

Information and Referral Databases serve as a library list of organizations that offer a broad range of information and services.

Example: A constituent may inquire about how to deal with a housing discrimination issue or a support group for substance abuse, the I&R database could be used to retrieve listings of services offered in a particular zip code or a designated city.

To Be Effective: Information and Referral databases are relatively straightforward in design, but need the investment of considerable staff time to keep current. In order for an information and referral service to operate efficiently, a fast machine and a network are necessary, and depending on the size of your organization this service often entails several people simultaneously needing access to the database to match requests for information.